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SUBJECT: BANGLADESH: SOME UNREGULATED MADRASSAS OPEN TO
GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) PolOff visited three madrassa religious schools not regulated by the government on 2/24 and found educators willing to accept some official oversight. They all expressed deep concern that without adopting government-approved curricula their students would continue to fail to qualify for mainstream institutions of higher education and face bleak job prospects. The visits suggested that Post's 1207 proposal to support increased government regulation and oversight of madrassas would have a receptive audience among the targeted schools. Helping the Government of Bangladesh introduce an official secular curriculum to non-regulated religious schools should help reduce the allure of Islamic extremism by expanding opportunities for students to become productive members of society.

QUOMI MADRASSAS: FILLING THE GAPS IN EDUCATION

2. (SBU) Qawmi madrassas are non-regulated private religious schools that do not receive government support, in contrast to Alia madrassas, which are nominally state-regulated and receive some state funding. (Note: "Qawmi" is just one of several alternative spellings for the non-regulated madrassas. End note.) Estimates of the number of Qawmi madrassas in Bangladesh range widely from 23,000 to 57,000; their frequent offers of free room, board and tuition are hard for many parents in this poverty-stricken country to turn down. Still, murky funding, sometime inflammatory teaching materials, and -- in some cases -- connections with radically conservative elements indicate the Government of Bangladesh has abdicated an important role by failing to regulate the Qawmi madrassas. Perhaps even more important, Qawmi madrassa courses typically do not prepare students with marketable skills and leave them unqualified to enter mainstream institutions of higher education.

QAWMI EDUCATORS ACKNOWLEDGE CURRICULUM PROBLEMS

3. (SBU) PolOff on 2/24 visited three all-male Qawmi madrassas in Rajshahi city and its environs in northwest Bangladesh. All three campuses appeared tranquil and their senior educators were exceedingly friendly. The first, Jamia Islamia Shah Makhdum Madrassa, is in central Rajshahi along the banks of the slow-moving Padma (Ganges) River. Orphans and children from poor families account for most of its 232

students; school funding comes from community contributions and monthly donations from an affiliated, prosperous shrine. The second, Rajshahi Darul Ulum Madrasa, has only 32 students, a drop from more than 300 caused by a sharp downturn in support from local benefactors due to tough economic times. The fish pond and mango grove that provide a pastoral setting for the rural school, a 10-minute drive outside Rajshahi, generate income to keep the school from closing. The third, Kaderia Bakhshia Anwarul Ulum Madrassa, has 150 students living on its sprawling campus next to a children's amusement park. Donations from followers of an Islamic saint buried on the madrassa grounds, including some from India and Pakistan, supplement student fees of about \$6 a month for tuition and food.

14. (SBU) Principals and headmasters from all three madrassas decried the dearth of job and education opportunities awaiting their students. Mufti Shahadat Ali, principal at the madrassa on the Padma, said most of his graduates became religious teachers. None had gone on to university except a few who first attended a government-regulated Alia madrassa. Principal Saifuddin at the rural madrassah, which provides education through seventh grade, said the only options for his students were to move on to another madrassa or become a religious teacher. "There aren't many choices," he said while twirling his black-and-gray beard. "Many people are losing interest in sending their children to Qawmi madrassas," added Mazhrul Islam, headmaster at the third school. "It's hard to get jobs."

15. (SBU) All three madrassas have incorporated at least some non-religious courses into their curriculum, most commonly Bangla language, English, mathematics, science and social studies. Jamia Islamia madrassa said it offered

extracurricular computer courses to its eldest students as well. But the quality of the education appeared suspect at best. The English textbook for fifth grade students at Jamia Islamia used colonial-era language and was a jumble of poor grammar and punctuation. At Kaderia madrassa, a 12-year-old who said, in Bangla, that his favorite class was English did not appear to understand simple questions asked by PolOff. Even when prompted in Bangla, he did not say a single word in English.

16. (SBU) To varying degrees, educators at all three schools expressed a desire to come under state guidance. Although they expressed concern that adopting government curriculum could dilute the Islamic education, they said they had no other recourse. "We fear losing some of the emphasis on religion," acknowledged Mazhrul Islam. Yet he said administrators of his madrassa decided in January to convert to a government-regulated Alia school. He explained: "We are trying to educate our children in the Koran and Hadith (the words and deeds of the Prophet Mohammad), but we also want them to get government jobs and other opportunities."

CONCLUSION: A GREAT OPPORTUNITY FOR 1207 SPENDING

17. (SBU) While visits to three Qawmi madrassas admittedly can provide only anecdotal insight, there can be little doubt that many unregulated religious schools are receptive to government oversight. Madrassa receptivity to curriculum reform will be gauged during a March visit by three American Islamic educators. Post's 1207 proposal is designed to support increased regulation of Qawmi madrassas by, among many steps, introducing a minimum secular curriculum and by training oversight boards. The proposal would focus on the Rajshahi region, where Islamic extremist groups typically have made the strongest inroads. Upon leaving the Jamia Islamia madrassa, PolOff was surprised when the principal engulfed him in a warm, five-second bear hug. That's at least one madrassa educator who does not find distasteful the prospect of USG assistance in helping establish a credible secular curriculum.

